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Review of the book "Deposition, 1940-1944: A Secret Diary of Life in Vichy France," by Léon Werth (David Ball, Ed. and Trans.)

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Léon Werth, *Deposition, 1940-1944: A Secret Diary of Life in Vichy France*. Edited and translated by David Ball. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxix + 325 pp. Biographical dictionary, appendix, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-1904-9954-9.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, Missouri University of Science and Technology.

David Ball's translation of Léon Werth's wartime diary adds to a growing collection of primary sources related to daily life in Occupied France now available in English.[1] Werth's diary, covering the period from the end of July 1940 to the liberation of Paris in August 1944, provides a welcome addition to this literature with its focus on rural life. Unlike Hélène Berr's journal or Jean Guéhenno's account of the dark years, which focus primarily on events in Paris, Werth's diary was largely written while he was in hiding at his wife's country home in Saint-Amour. Located in the southern, unoccupied zone, the mountain village between Lyon and the Swiss border served as the Jewish writer's vantage point on the war. He records his observations on how the war affected locals, but also provides a window into how the war was presented and present for most: through newspapers, radio, and rumor. This dual register of the local and global view of war provides a valuable perspective that addresses many of the questions scholars have asked about the Vichy years.

Originally published in French in 1946, the book was reissued in 1992 with a preface by Jean-Pierre Azéma. In his preface, Azéma writes that Werth's "fine, extraordinary text had been forgotten" (p. xxx) for decades despite its value for historians, and Lucien Febvre praises *Deposition*, stating, "I know of few documents more precious in everything that has been published up to now on the France of 1940-1944" (p. xxxi). Ball's translation includes Azéma's preface as well as Febvre's 1947 article on *Deposition* written for *Les Annales*, which was also included in the 1992 edition. The current English version begins with these earlier pieces and with Werth's introduction to the 1946 edition, but abridges the journal from the original French, which is 730 pages long, to 314 pages of diary entries. Choosing to concentrate on "Werth's testimony on life in Vichy France," Ball has omitted some of the descriptions of the landscape, some of Werth's reflections on what he's read, and some criticisms of obscure novelists and essayists (p. xv). While some scholars may miss these more "intellectual" musings, Ball's editing provides readers with an engaging, focused, and accessible narrative of the concerns of daily life told through the eyes of one man and the stories of his friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

Werth was not a historian by training, but rather a novelist, journalist, and essayist with more than ten novels and dozens of articles to his name. His journal draws on his skills of observation and gift for writing to bring the ambiguities of wartime France to life for the reader. Born into an assimilated Jewish family, Werth was sixty-two at the time of France's defeat. A veteran of the Great War, the author was anti-militaristic and also anti-colonialist, themes that appear throughout the journal. With time on his hands, Werth dedicates himself to recording life in the village of 2000 inhabitants through the prism of a world at war. Shopkeepers, railway workers, local notables, and peasants feature prominently in Werth's daily writings. Scholars of Vichy France will find much in this journal that is familiar. Werth writes about Marshal Pétain and public opinion regularly, engages with ideas about terrorism (Resistance) and collaboration, discusses the use of denunciation, explains the black and grey

markets, and highlights the propaganda of the regime through newspapers and the radio. He listens to foreign radio broadcasts and muses on the role of Charles de Gaulle and the Americans in the future. While Werth often focuses on politics and the war's military progression, nothing seems to escape his attention from the role of sports under the regime to the removal of statues from town squares.

For scholars interested in France and the treatment of Jews, there is much to consider in Werth's journal. Like other assimilated Jews, Werth examines his "Jewishness" after the imposition of Vichy's anti-Jewish laws.^[2] He travels to a nearby town to register as a Jew after the law of June 2, 1941 and writes, "Thus the marshal and M. Xavier Vallat have forced me to claim I'm from a Jewish nation to which I felt no connection" (p. 101). He further explains his decision to declare himself: "It would be just too cowardly to deliberate about whether or not I feel Jewish! If you insult the name of Jew in me, then I am Jewish, totally Jewish, Jewish to the tips of my toes, Jewish to my very guts. After that, we'll see" (p. 102). Although he lives in the Free Zone, he mentions events happening in the Occupied Zone including the imposition of the yellow star, comparing it to the bell that lepers carried or other "intolerable or silly" insignias (p. 142). The Vel d'Hiv roundup of July 1942 and especially the arrest of children affected Werth particularly deeply. As in other cases throughout the diary, Werth notes both the hypocrisy and self-interest that permeates daily life around Jewish persecution. Comparing the brutality of European colonialism to Nazi Germany's actions, Werth writes, "you can suffer as much by being deprived of butter or tobacco as by news of the children swarming and dying in the German trains and concentration camps" (p. 159).

Werth's *Deposition* reveals that it was possible to know about the arrest of Jews, concentration camps, and even the Polish ghettos and death camps. Werth first mentions Auschwitz in his journal in December 1941. After listening to a speech by Churchill in November 1942 in which the British Prime Minister asserted that 260,000 of the 400,000 Jews in Poland had been "massacred, starved, electrocuted, or gassed," (a gross underestimation) Werth reflects on the difficulty of understanding such massive destruction. He writes, "You could abandon all political or moral reflection and simply interpret statistics to solve the problems of these times. The numbers that measure the war, cruelty, or death, like the numbers that measure the speed of light, are nothing more than mathematical abstractions" (p. 178). While acknowledging that these numbers are hard to comprehend, Werth reserves some of his harshest criticism for those who have chosen to ignore what was happening around them: "The Vichy civil servant and people like Madeleine B—, who don't know, don't want to know about the concentration camps, the executions, the massacres. You'd think contemporaries know the present less well than historians know the past. During the Terror, in 1793, there were probably many people who didn't know it was the Reign of Terror. It's not that those who don't know are deprived of information. It's because they don't want to know. Delicate people who close their eyes before a rough world. They need a smooth, sandpapered world" (p. 217). He was less forgiving after he clandestinely returned to the family apartment in Paris in 1944, recording a conversation between his wife and Madame V—: "As Suzanne tells her about German cruelty and 'atrocities': 'I don't know anything,' she says. 'We don't know anything. I don't know any victims of German cruelty.' There is a certain kind of lady who *doesn't know*. Bitch" (p. 250).

Werth is not only concerned with the fate of Jews, but also with the execution of "terrorists" and hostages for Resistance activities. He writes about the maquis, train derailments, and the underground press and wonders how he can become involved in writing articles for the Resistance. It is through his wife Suzanne that the reader gets a further glimpse into various forms of clandestine activity. While Léon Werth is living in Saint-Amour, Suzanne remains in Paris, but illegally crosses the demarcation line thirteen times to visit her husband in the unoccupied zone. Sometimes she walks for miles, sometimes she uses the services of a smuggler, and still other times, she hides in a train's freight car or on a board slipped between the front wheels of a locomotive. In Paris, she is a member of a network that helps downed Allied airmen and other "hunted" individuals escape France, putting her own life at risk to help others. Werth never discusses his wife's motivation, but a picture emerges of a strong and courageous woman.

There is much to be admired in Werth's *Deposition*. While the immediate context and description of a rural village at war is valuable in and of itself, Werth's musings on politics, the press, and human nature add a dimension that makes this more than a chronicle of shortages and daily life in a small town. Werth is both an observer and a participant in the history unfurling before him. He captures the ambiguity, ambivalence, and endless waiting associated with the war as it was happening. With the advantage of hindsight, scholars have written about the topics that Werth experienced and recorded in real time with the extraordinary talent of an ethnographer.

David Ball's highly readable translation of this remarkable record is a welcome addition for scholars of the Vichy period and suitable for classroom use. The diary could easily be paired with articles or books related to any number of topics or serve as the starting point for a research project. Combined with the increasing number of accounts available in English translation, *Deposition* offers an additional and insightful perspective on France's dark years.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Hélène Berr, *The Journal of Hélène Berr*, trans. by David Bellos (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008); Jean Guéhenno, *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944: Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris*, trans. by David Ball (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Charles B. Potter, ed., *The Resistance, 1940: An Anthology of Writings from the French Underground* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018). Léon Werth's account of the exodus has been translated by Austin Denis Johnston as *33 Days: A Memoir* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House Publishing, 2015). See Sandra Ott's recent review of Guéhenno for H-France at <http://www.h-france.net/vol18reviews/vol18no68ott.pdf> (accessed May 14, 2018).

[2] Hélène Berr writes in her journal, "When I write the word *Jew*, I am not saying exactly what I mean, because for me that distinction does not exist: I do not feel different from other people, I will never think of myself as a member of a separate human group, and perhaps that is why I suffer so much, because I do not understand it at all" (p. 236). The historian, war veteran, and resister Marc Bloch wrote in 1943 that although he was born a Jew, "I have, through life, felt that I was above all, and quite simply, a Frenchman" (p. 178). See March Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, trans. by Gerard Hopkins (New York: Norton, 1968).

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